

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/95020>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-12-06 and may be subject to change.

EIGHT

The Theology of Grace as the Hermeneutics of Salvation and Liberation

A.J.M. van den Hoogen

Introduction

The third part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is devoted to "Life in Christ." Chapter three of this part is entitled "God's Salvation: Law and Grace." In this chapter a central aspect of the Christian way of speaking about human existence is discussed, namely, speaking about the reality of grace. This contribution will examine this theme. We will discuss such questions as: the theological connection between speaking about human acts with respect to morality and speaking about grace (1); the experiential reality to which speaking about grace refers (2); the connection between the contemporary experience of reality, the experience of grace, and the moral nature of human acts (3).

Moral Acts and the Experience of Grace

In order to give the fundamental moral character of human acts a foundation, the starting point of the text of the Catechism is a theological reflection with respect to human destiny. We will first determine the course of this reflection and then examine how the moral nature of human acts is described theologically.

Human Acts from the Perspective of Human Destiny

In the structure of the Catechism the moral character of human acts is discussed within a framework that is described as "Life in Christ," and, more specifically, from the viewpoint of "Life in the Spirit." Life in the Spirit describes the vocation of human beings, as the text clearly states.

Now the text makes it clear that human destiny is viewed from the perspective of the human vocation, and that this vocation should be discussed from two viewpoints (cf. 1699-1700). On the one hand, this vocation con-

sists in human dignity, a dignity that is intrinsically related to the creation of humankind. On the other hand, this vocation exists in the growth toward perfection, which is realized in acts directed toward what is good. Thus, in this approach human acts have an intrinsic purposiveness (teleology). The text describes this as follows: "In man, true freedom is an 'outstanding manifestation of the divine image'" (1712). This already demonstrates a certain choice in the Catechism's train of thought, namely, to view human acts less as conditioned by circumstances and more as arising from an initial freedom. It is unfortunate that this choice is not itself defended, as this would have connected the Catechism much more directly with important moral debates that are now taking place in Western culture.

The text of the Catechism does give a theological justification for this choice of a teleological approach to acts. The first dimension of this theological teleology reads: "Christ ... makes man fully manifest to man himself and brings to light his exalted vocation" (1710); the second dimension of this theological teleology states that the human being is able to know this vocation actively, for he is "from his very conception ordered to God and destined for eternal beatitude" (1711). And the third dimension is encountered in the following text: "Man is [consequently, one might say] obliged to follow the moral law, which urges him 'to do what is good and avoid what is evil.' This law makes itself heard in his conscience" (1713).

Law and Grace: The Theological Interpretation of Human Acts

The almost logical (in this case, syllogistic) reasoning that forms the content of the Catechism's theological teleology should not lose sight of the fact that the Catechism's text wishes to place human acts explicitly within a salvific historic framework (cf. also 1739-1742). That salvific historical framework is drawn by means of the Pauline concepts 'law' and 'grace'. I will analyze more closely the way in which the Catechism elaborates on this framework in this subsection. It is an important issue because the Catechism's text wants to place human acts within a theological teleology.

An Example from Paul

That there is a connection between moral acts and 'life in Christ' is probably better worked out by Paul than anyone else when he, for example, in the first letter to the Corinthians traces back the confession that Jesus is the Lord to the working of the Spirit of God and emphasizes that this confession can be understood as a word of true wisdom under the influence of the Spirit of God. This wisdom has its roots in love and its test is suffering. The rule by which people are called to live is a dynamic that is kept under tension by the contrasts between love and suffering. For him, the outstanding reason for

speaking of love and suffering is his experience with and insight into the meaning of life and the destiny of Jesus Christ. This specific framework of reference leads him to ask again and again the question of how the Torah developed and was enriched in the history and new life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is Paul's framework of reference when he speaks of love and suffering. Speaking of law and grace, and asking himself the question of what true wisdom includes, Paul asks how the true rule of life is described in the history, suffering, and new life of Jesus Christ, and how the Jewish Torah ('a lamp for your feet', as the rabbinic metaphor has it) develops and is enriched. It is especially the experiences with the contrasts between love and suffering, also and particularly applied in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, that bring him to the weighty question of the relationship between law and grace.

For Paul there are no general anthropological issues at stake in this, although his Jewish and Hellenistic religious language has constituted the occasion for the outlines and concepts of theological anthropology. It is the fate of Paul's deep searching observations on the history of the Torah that they are not as well received in the rabbinic oral traditions as they are in Stoic, Romance, and scholastic Christian schemes of thought. This still occurs in the Catechism's text, in which, for example, the Pauline way of speaking concerning the law is directly linked to the philosophical category of moral law and Christian Stoic thinking on 'wisdom' (cf. 1950-1951). The Pauline terminology with regard to the old law and the New Law has been linked to various 'worldviews' that have endeavoured to understand the 'law', the '*ordo*', and the '*ratio*' of all reality 'as history (*Geschichte*).'

One of the results of using Paul's theology in this way is that his specific point of reference is sometimes scarcely recognizable in the several theological elaborations on salvation history. The thematic, historical, and, in Paul's eyes, irreplaceable death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was often hidden behind the use of general terminology. These terms no longer make clear that one cannot speak of a theology of grace without speaking of the experience of a rupture. They no longer disclose that one cannot speak of a theology of grace without reference to that irretrievable moment of God's revelatory acts in the tension between love and suffering that has become the historical fate and destiny of the praxis of life and the authentic faith in the God of Jesus of Nazareth. It should also be added immediately that this rupture is also a part of the experience of all who follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth. The '*metanoia*', conversion, is the 'story' *par excellence* that attempt to give words to the describing of God's surprising, revelatory acts. Faith implies a discovery that—however described as processual or literary—is immediately joined with a commitment that affects and renews one's life. This commitment discovers 'life' in experiences with 'death' and declares to be 'death' what looked like 'life'. It is a commitment that does

not leave a single fragment of someone's life unaffected and knows no way 'back'.

Justification: Rupture and Reformation

Within the theological traditions that appeared after Paul, the schemas of salvation history have often left little room for the 'interruptions' (J.-B. Metz) that are non-negotiable aspects of thinking about God's revelatory acts and of the conversion that occurs among people when they receive a glimpse of these acts of God. That is why it is important to deal explicitly with the framework of salvation history for human acts. The framework and the subject interpret each other mutually.

In the train of thought of the Catechism's authors, emphasis is placed not so much on the experiences of the rupture which lie within "the grace of the Holy Spirit" (1987) as on the renewing connection of the conversion, of the "New Law or the Law of the Gospel" (1965) with the Old Law (1961-1964). The Catechism seems to want to place much emphasis on the fact that the 'New Law', although it is perfecting and renewing, is linked to the 'Old Law'. This terminology entails a problem completely different from that of Paul's presentation of the question. Paul's question was how the Torah's rule for living relates to Jesus' rule for living. As a theological interpretation, the Torah's rule for living held that it was the way of the covenant of Yahweh with his (Jewish) people. Jesus' rule for living, as a theological interpretation, held that it was the way of the new covenant 'through his blood'. Also connected with these theological questions were the questions of theological meaning and of the scope of Paul's mission and the first Christian communities. Already here one can see that orthopraxis precedes orthodoxy. The Catechism's question is a different one, i.e., the question of whether the moral views of the Roman Catholic Church and their foundations can claim universal validity (cf. 1956). The term 'old law' refers primarily to a foundation, viewed as immutable, of the moral acts that endure in the midst of all historical variations (cf. 1958), and which human beings can know through their reason and should follow in conscience. In addition, the term 'old law' refers to the Torah, now summarized in the Ten Commandments. In a Stoicist model of thought, which goes back to the patriarchal theology of Irenaeus and Augustine, as well as others, this 'old law' is described in its two meanings as a "preparation for the Gospel" (1964). Here too one finds reference to an orthopraxis that appears to precede this explanation of the 'orthodoxy'. Now it concerns "the moral catechesis of the apostolic teachings" (1971) and the sacramental praxis of the Roman Catholic Church (1972).

By placing so much emphasis on the renewing connection of the 'New Law' to the 'old law', the emphasis is also placed more strongly on a theology that confirms that faith in Jesus Christ has a significance that can be uni-

versalized, and that consequently the moral language of the Roman Catholic Church also has this significance. Because of this, faith assumes the character of endorsing the cooperation between the grace of God and the freedom of human beings (1993) much more than that of a rupturing experience that uproots human beings and confronts them with contextually determined choices. And the renewal that is attributed to the experience of the Holy Spirit is depicted much more as a renewal of humankind in society and culture (cf. 1995). Completely within the tradition of the Council fathers of Trent and their opposition to Martin Luther's theological basis of the 'freedom of a Christian person', the Catechism directs one's attention not so much to the personal relation of the person with his or her God, a relation that is also contextually determined in its experience of rupturing. Rather, the Catechism calls one's attention to the meaning that the sacramental praxis has for the realization and renewal that the faith relation of people with God has for moral actions. Through these accents the Catechism's authors (still) appear to see Kantian moral philosophy as the greatest challenge in our (Western) culture puts to the church and its discussion, which seeks for universality, of the human vocation.

The Experience of Grace

"Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace *escapes our experience* and cannot be known except by faith. We cannot therefore rely on our feelings or our works to conclude that we are justified and saved" (2005). This quote demands thorough reflection. It is immediately recognizable as fitting into the classic theology of grace, which in its Neo-Thomistic form is characterized by a dualism between the reality of grace and the reality of experience and by a dualism between faith and knowledge. We will first ask whether biblical statements inevitably cause such a dualism, and then we work out what people in the past attempted to achieve with such a dualism.

The Salvific, Conciliatory Concern of God for Human Beings

The word 'grace' is a specifically Christian term insofar as it indicates the totality of God's salvific and conciliatory concern for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. This salvific and conciliatory concern on the part of God for human beings is indicated in Scripture through several different terms and characterizations, and these terms often stem from the Tanakh, the Jewish tradition of faith.

O.H. Pesch distinguishes five central concepts in reference to this. First he refers to the word *hānan*.¹ This term refers to a favour granted to someone upon which that someone cannot make any claim. One experiences it spontaneously and one may pray for it, but it is always given freely to human beings by divine will (cf. Genesis 6:8, Exodus 33:12-16). God's activity of *hānan* is expressed through a number of gifts, which are recognized in 'saving from distress', in 'communion with God', and everything the lies between them. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, abbreviated as LXX) the word is translated as *charis*, the later 'technical', that is to say, 'summarizing' word for grace in the New Testament. There is, however, also a great difference between *hānan* and *charis*. The former concerns one's *turning toward* one's fellow human being, while the initial meaning of *charis* is that which causes happiness, appears to be pleasant, and thus it refers to sweetness, charm, 'grace'. The Hebrew *hānan* does not have the dualism of an internal disposition that is externalized in or caused by external deeds of kindness. The 'turning toward' is seen as an answer to a flaw in another, a flaw that is expressed in begging or pleading. Originally, *hānan* did not have a religious meaning. Where it did acquire a religious meaning in the Jewish tradition of faith, Yahweh's activity of *hānan* has to do with human *life*: healing (for example, Psalm 6:2), salvation from distress (for example, Psalm 9:13-14), release from fear (for example, Genesis 42:21), salvation or redemption (for example, Psalm 26:11), 'restoration' (Psalm 41:4), forgiveness of sins (Psalm 41:3), and strength (Psalm 86:16).

Subsequently, Pesch refers to the words *hesed* and *'ēmet*, usually translated in the Septuagint as *eleos* and *pistis*. *Hesed* is often linked to *'ēmet*. *Hesed wa'ēmet* (grace and faithfulness) is the outstanding example of covenantal terminology. Actually, *hesed* refers to the attitude and behaviour of the people, that which keeps the nation together. *Hesed* means reciprocity and faithfulness; *hesed* needs to be answered by *hesed*. It transcends the scheme of performance and exchange. It has to do with commitment to someone's *life*. The religious and theological meaning of this word has its roots in this view of interhuman relationships. With reference to people and God to use *'ēmet* in reference to either human beings or God means that one can cast oneself on their actions, words, and love. They can be trusted. It means trustworthiness with the nuance of dignity (from the root *'āman*, which accounts for the meaning of security, endurance, giving certainty). "In determining the relationship between God and his people, the central meaning of

¹ Cf. O.H. Pesch, *Frei sein aus Gnade: Theologische Anthropologie* (Freiburg, 1983), pp. 115-23; also cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde: Genade en bevrijding* (Bloemendaal, 1977), esp. pp. 74-98.

ḥesed becomes apparent from the fact that *ḥesed* is included in the great hymnic, liturgical proclaimers of God, in which the Tanakh praises the nature of God as 'a God of people' (Exodus 34:6-7). God is a 'compassionate and gracious God', patient and rich in *ḥesed wa'ēmet*.²

A fourth concept that is important is the term *šēdāqāh* (justice), translated in the Septuagint as *dikaïosunē*. This concept also had a secular meaning originally and received a religious meaning in a time of theocratic, nationalist view of the people of Israel.³ In Israel all authority was exercised in the name of Yahweh, Israel's only true king, in both secular and religious matters. Human justice had to do with God's justice. Later, in Jesus' time as well, the Jews no longer possessed political independence. Authority and community, authority and religion became separated. The concept 'justice' became desecrated. But it was linked with the meaning that an actual community practises justice. When conflicts are present, there is no 'justice' anymore, neither with the one party or the other. 'Justice' indicates the internal cohesion between human good deeds and the situation with respect to the well-being, salvation, and happiness of the entire community.

The fifth concept Pesch mentions is *raḥāmīm*, which is translated in the Septuagint as *oiktirmos*. The word is very affective. *Rāḥam* means womb (cf. Jeremiah 20:17), the soft part of the person (Genesis 43:30). *Raḥāmīm* is the plural form of this, referring to the tender, natural, emotional love of a mother for her child, and thus also compassion (cf. Hosea 11:8, Genesis 43:30, I Kings 3:26). *Ḥesed* is linked to *raḥāmīm*, through which God's *ḥesed* acquires the meaning of tender, vulnerable, motherly love. This is present in Hosea in particular. But this connection within a double linkage becomes more frequent (Jeremiah 16:5, Zechariah 7:9, Psalm 25:6). This is why Yahweh also expects *ḥesed* from Israel in return, and in his reasoning the prophet says to the people: "There is no faithfulness [*ēmet*], no love [*ḥesed*], no acknowledgment of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1-2). There is then no longer any 'grace'.

In the New Testament *charis* becomes the predominant central concept for 'grace'. This becomes, as it were, the 'technical', summarizing word for God's salvific and reconciling concern for people, creating faith and love and evoking hope. It is through Paul in particular that the term *charis* has received this 'technical', summarizing meaning. The direct background for this lies in the wish for grace that is expressed at the beginning and/or end of Chris-

² E. Schillebeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde*, p. 82.

³ Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde*, pp. 117-18.

tian epistolary literature.⁴ Greeks and Greek-speaking Jews began their letters with *chaire* (hail!). Analogous to this, we can find a greeting in the beginning and/or end of each work included in the 'Pauline corpus', the oldest form of which is found in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "The grace [*he charis*] of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 5:28). For the rest, the reality indicated by the word grace in the New Testament is, again, expressed in many various ways—for example, adoption (Roman 9:4), children of God (Matthew 5:9), the gift of the Holy Spirit (Galations 3:5), being snatched from the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13), liberation through purchase or ransom (1 Corinthians 1:18, 30), salvation and redemption (Luke 1:69), reconciliation after an argument (2 Colossians 5:18), justification and sanctification (Romans 6:16), the renewal of people and the world (John 13:34), and living in perfection (Ephesians 2:5).

Through Paul in particular, the concept of *charis* has become a summarizing term (a *terminus technicus*) for that which is meant by the 'riches of God's grace' (Ephesians 1:7b, 2:4-7, 3:8) in the New Testament. In 1 Thessalonians, though, it does not appear. Here Paul speaks of the "gospel of God" (for example, 1 Thessalonians 2:2) which is at the same time the "gospel of Christ" (1 Thessalonians 3:2). This gospel entails the confession of "faith in God" and "faith in the coming Jesus Christ." They, the Thessalonian Christians, "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God," and "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Here a summary, as it were, is of the original Christian kerygma is given to *pagans*, and there is no trace yet of *charis* and justification, the later key concepts in Paul. A key concept here is Jesus' coming *parousia* (for example, 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 3:13). Not until 1 Corinthians, the letter to the Galations, and 2 Corinthians does the term *charis* become a *terminus technicus*. In 1 Corinthians *charis* appears to mean giving thanks (10:30, 15:57), especially for the giving of alms by the Corinthian Christians for the benefit of the community in Jerusalem (16:3) (also see 2 Corinthians 8:1-9). But *charis* also here means God's salvific revelation in Christ and by this is actually linked to God's election of them to be Christians: "[God's] grace given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4). Here the Greek meaning of *charis* still plays a role: God's grace endows Christians with rich gifts (1:5, 6). In the letter to the Galations there is talk of the *charis Theou* (the grace of God) (2:19-21). The 'gospel' is now identified with justification: "... [we] know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus so that we may be justified by

⁴ Cf. O.H. Pesch, *Frei sein aus Gnade*, pp. 101 ff.

faith in Christ" (2:16a). Paul sees himself as the apostle who is sent to proclaim this message of justification. In contrast to the usual usage of *charis* in the greetings, *charis* receives a very pointed meaning here: Paul was called by *charis* (1:15). "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not *something that man made up*. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (1:11). *Charis* is a revelation, of which Paul is the apostle, and the content of this revelation is justification through faith in Christ, by which people are freed from slavery (5:1).

The biblical statements do not compel one to speak of grace dualistically. Rather, one can establish that the word 'grace' encompasses a variety of human experiences—experiences that for the rest are not traced back to a human subject of actions.

Natural and Supernatural

If the reality of grace is a revelatory reality, does 'grace' then belong to an accessible reality beyond our experience? Does 'revelation' mean that 'grace' falls outside of our experience? Does 'revelation' mean that only the proclamation and *kerygma* make access to 'grace' possible? These questions belong first and foremost in an introduction with respect to fundamental theology. For at issue here are the complicated issues of the relationship between history and revelation, the relationship between faith and knowledge, the relationship between the authority of proclamation and the authority of experience. One issue deserves to be mentioned and discussed here briefly: the conceptual pair 'natural/supernatural.'

The conceptual pair 'natural/supernatural' has long dominated theology in general in the modern period (in fact, since the seventeenth century) and certainly the treatment of grace as well. Although the term 'supernatural' already appears as a *technical term* in Thomas Aquinas in the "Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate" (1256-1259), the conceptual pair 'natural/supernatural' acquires a specific meaning in the modern period. Thomas refers to God as the 'supernatural principle (*principium supernaturale*)'.⁵ But with respect to Thomas one should understand this from a theological view of 'natural' reality. Our concrete reality is, in this view, assimilated into a process. It comes out of (*exitus*) and returns to (*reditus*) God. Creation, people, sin, and grace are given a place in a system of thought that views everything as emanating from God, who creates, preserves, and, when they

⁵ Cf. "Übernatürlich," in: *LThK*, vol. 10, pp. 437-40.

return to God, glorifies and sanctifies.⁶ This schema of emanating and returning does not share our modern concept of historicity, but it is nevertheless a schema in which reflection on concrete reality occurs in the light of God's concern for people and the world, and which has *no* reference to another supernatural 'order'. The state of grace is, in Thomas' view, that the eternal love of God is concerned and related in a creative way with that which is the centre of being human—'freedom', we would say today. Through this concern and relatedness people are, as it were, 'lifted up' out of their finitude, 'pulled up high' to share in the communion with God, to share in the life of God. And from that sharing in the communion with God also flows the involvement of people with God as it acquires shape in faith, hope, and love.⁷

Thus in Thomas' view there is *no* such thing as an *antithesis* between grace and human reality. There is talk of a distinction between grace and human reality, but that distinction arises from the conviction that God's involvement with people is relational in nature and that the concern of God is directed toward the salvation of all people. In the modern period (that is, since the seventeenth century) that distinction becomes an 'antithesis', and the relationship between the reality of grace (supernatural) and human (natural) reality is viewed as a *competition* (Schoonenberg), an idea that has become characteristic of Neo-Scholastic theology.⁸ In a well-known Neo-Scho-

⁶ Cf. M.-D. Chenu, "Le plan de la Somme Théologique de saint Thomas," in: *Rev. Thom.* 45 (1939): 93-107.

⁷ Cf. O.H. Pesch and A. Peters, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung* (Darmstadt, 1981), p. 89.

⁸ Neo-scholastic theology is that theology whose framework is the so-called 'contemporary scholasticism', which began at the end of the eighteenth century and, particularly since the middle of the nineteenth century, continued as a form of Christian philosophy, which is based chiefly on the rediscovery of the work of Thomas Aquinas (cf. "Contemporary Scholasticism," in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII (New York, 1967), pp. 1165ff.; "Le renouveau de la scholastique," in *D.Th.C.*, Vol. XV/1 (Paris, 1946), pp. 426ff.) Thus initially Neo-scholasticism was a form of philosophy, but very much influenced by theology, particularly by its ideal of knowledge, i.e., the ability to form concepts that give a logical, exhaustive definition of reality and are therefore logically necessary. Since the so-called '*nouvelle théologie*' that arose in the thirties in Europe, in France and Germany as well, it was this ideal of knowledge against which people strove. This ideal denies in particular that theology and faith concern God's mystery and the secret of life of people and moreover denies that faith has reference to salvific history. Also cf. A.G.M. Van Melsen, "Wat maakte het neothomisme zo attractief?" in: B. Delfgaauw, *et al.*, *De wijsgerige Thomas: Terugblik op het neothomisme* (Baarn, 1984), pp. 28-48.

lastic textbook for dogmatics by F. Diekamp, *Katholische Dogmatik nach den Grundsätzen des hl. Thomas* (1912-1914), on the relationship between grace and reality one reads: "a nature perfect in itself, equipped with everything that is necessary, appropriates the supernatural like a *superadditum*."⁹ In this quotation two points are immediately striking. First of all, reality is thought of as 'closed'. This does not exclude the fact that this reality is attributed with its own dynamics. "Naturally this is what belongs to nature, that which is constitutive for it, or belongs to its results, or belongs to her requirements," states Diekamp. (For example, it is the nature of the eye that it can see, that it actually does see and that there is light that makes things visible.) The second striking point is that grace is viewed as an 'added reality'. What then is 'supernatural'? The answer is: that which does not belong to nature. Formulated in a positive way, "the supernatural (*supernatura*) is a gift that owes nothing to nature, a gift that is added to nature (*donum indebitum et superadditum*)."

Thus in this Neo-Scholastic view grace and human reality are viewed as 'two levels' (L. Boff) which are stacked upon each other yet have no internal connection. And it is particularly the view of 'nature' that in this view hinders one from being able to conceive of an internal reference between grace and reality. Already years ago the Dutch theologian P. Schoonenberg pointed out the implications this has for anthropology. It is then impossible to reconcile God's real involvement in human reality with the freedom of human beings. In this view God's actions are always at the cost of that of people, and human activity is at the cost of God's involvement. In particular, as long as this involvement of people in the world and of God in human reality is seen as a form of causality, in this view of natural and supernatural one cannot resolve the conflict between these two 'causalities'.¹⁰

Boff then also correctly concludes that in the Neo-Scholastic view it is impossible to experience grace. Grace belongs to another supernatural order that is inaccessible to human experience. It was not the intention of such a theology to discuss grace as a reality that can be experienced. After all, it was a theology that attempted to formulate "universally valid insights" (Van Melsen). When it is asked today whether people can experience grace, there is a completely different intention in the question, an intention that is fundamentally different from that of Neo-Scholasticism on several points. Two points of difference in particular are important. First, much of contemporary

⁹ Cited by L. Boff, *Erfahrung von Gnade: Entwurf einer Gnadenlehre* (Düsseldorf, 1978), p. 66.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Schoonenberg, *Hij is een God van mensen* ('s-Hertogenbosch, 1969), pp. 9-14 especially.

theology has once again discovered that while Scripture and theologians such as Thomas Aquinas do distinguish between grace and human reality, they do not make them antithetical to each other. *Charis* or *gratia* refers to God in his concern for concrete people in their concrete reality. Secondly, much of contemporary theology has once again discovered that we should not think of this concrete reality as a 'closed', albeit 'dynamic', reality. Neither from a metaphysical nor historical quest into reality does our experience of multiplicity and mutability appear to be adequately explained and understood if one takes this as one's starting point. It would be better, Boff suggests, if we stopped speaking in terms of natural/supernatural.¹¹

The Experience of Grace as Interpreted Experience

Is one able to experience 'grace'? Even if one has consciously departed from the neo-scholastic schema of nature/supernature and replaced it with the schema of grace and freedom (freedom being understood in the concrete context in which freedom must be liberated), this question cannot simply be answered with 'yes' or 'no'. Whoever answers 'no' thereby probably admits to not having been able to discover anything 'revelatory' in the biblical images and metaphors by which the experience of grace of believers in the Jewish and Christian traditions was expressed. Whoever answers 'yes' does recognize in one's own reality something of those promises of the experience of God's concern which is expressed in the biblical metaphors. Theological reflection can contribute to clearing up misunderstandings that hinder this recognition, and it can also contribute new models of understanding that are justifiable; but it cannot bring it about that a person in his or her own life or a group in its own community come to this recognition.

In the theology of grace, therefore, when it is said that people can experience 'grace', it is an attempt, following the footsteps of those who answer 'yes', to clarify an experience in the presence of those who say 'yes' but also in the presence of those who answer 'no'. It is thus an attempt to clarify an experience that arises in the witness of believing people, where it concerns the experience that *in* our human existence can illuminate a moment of gratuity that can give meaning to our existence, offer a perspective, can become a power for the renewal of people and the world. In the Jewish and Christian traditions of faith there is the trust that 'models of understanding' can also be borrowed from our experience, models that cause one 'to do' and 'to think', in which this "mystery of compassion" (Schillebeeckx) can be expressed in a trustworthy manner, although it is always and by definition partial. For, one can say with Schillebeeckx,

¹¹ Cf. L. Boff, *Erfahrung von Gnade*, p. 72.

revelation possesses a structure of experience. The good that certain people experienced in Jesus was experienced and identified as divine salvation. That which was actually experienced in Jesus by Christians was therefore *neither pure 'conclusion' nor pure 'immediate' experience, but interpretive experience—the experience of faith*. Because of the surprising newness of their experience of salvation in Jesus they also wish to place it emphatically in line with their Jewish-religious tradition of experience, which caused them to experience Jesus interpreted in such a way as if they actually experienced him. ... At the same time this led to a reinterpretation of this history from the experience of a renewed history. From this there finally grew a religious view on total history: unity of a divine plan, decree or divine ordainment, that is unfolded *in and through* the history of people. In continually changing situations, in continually new words, the Christian community of faith will ultimately continue to say nothing but that they experience divine salvation in Jesus Christ, even in philosophical concepts that are sometimes very complex. If the old concepts or interpretive moments no longer apply in new situations and if the needs and requirements change, the interpretive concepts also change. But the source experience remains the same in this change: in their own individual situations people continue to experience divine salvation in Jesus.¹²

The Experience of Grace and the Moral Nature of Human Actions

At the end of the first section the question was asked as to whether in the text of the Catechism (still) sees Kantian moral philosophy as the greatest challenge that our (Western) culture puts to the church and its discussion, which seeks for universality, of the human vocation. The second section has indicated a way along which, according to many contemporary theologians, the dilemma between grace and the experience (of freedom) can be transcended and the tension between the two can be made productive. This third section will specifically deal with the moral aspect of the experience of freedom. The question is now whether the tension between the reality of grace as endorsed in faith and the moral aspect of the experience of faith can be made productive.

Morality and the Experience of Grace

In the Catechism much attention is paid to the idea that—first—an inalienable moral dimension should be attributed to human actions and that this moral

¹² E. Schillebeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde*, p.55, italics mine.

dimension is, theologically speaking, a free response on the part of human beings to the free initiative of God (see numbers 1996-2005 in particular). The Catechism's text joins in forcefully with the thought of the great theologian Augustine. With this the text also joins in with that which, since Augustine, has become the core issue of the *tractatus de gratia* that originated through his work: the relationship between human freedom and experience of grace. This was a very complicated issue already in the time of Augustine, not in the least because Augustine himself also changed his views during the course of his life and finally came to endorse a view in which there was hardly room to speak of true human freedom. Fortunately, the text of this Catechism does not follow Augustine this far. The view that is present in the Catechism is close to the position to which the Council fathers of Trent subscribed.

A key problem in Augustine was his insight that a fundamental brokenness continued to dominate his moral actions. "What I do not want to do I do, and what I want to do I do not do," he says in his *Confessions*. It is a way of consideration that arises from a glance 'within', a way of consideration that searches for an answer to the (for Augustine) pressing question of why human actions are not thoroughly transparent, why the rationality of the will is apparently insufficient to penetrate the motives of our actions. Apparently, his insight says, the human will to live according to God's law is not enough to deal with God from within one's life.

Augustine then comes to the faithful conviction that life with God has an aspect which he calls *gratia preveniens*. God's grace (cf. 2001) already surrounds people, even before there is talk of exercising human will. For Augustine, especially in his *Confessions*, this was an insight that created room within the acknowledgement of God's turning toward us to be able to continue to acknowledge that the human will is in our experience so often thwarted by human desires. For the Council fathers of Trent the insight into the *gratia preveniens*—which had in the meantime already expanded into an established element of the treatment of grace—was an important aspect of their resistance to Martin Luther's Reformation. They wanted to hold onto the theological meaning of the sacraments of the church, and according to their insight this meaning lay in the necessary mediation and confirmation of life with God. In the Catechism it almost sounds like a pietistic alternative for the emphasis that since Kant has been placed on the autonomous rationality of the human will: the *gratia preveniens* "is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith and sanctification through charity" (2001).

Morality, the Experience of Grace, and Historical Awareness

Since Kant, the insight has grown in our Western culture that the autonomous rationality of the human will itself has a public character. The subject is a public subject. The public character and the moral character go hand in hand.

Earlier in this article I pointed out that the text in the Catechism sought another position, a position that cannot be called the 'enlightenment of the Enlightenment' but rather a contra-Enlightenment position. It is typical of the Catechism's position that, among other things, an alternative for the public dimension of morality also fits within this. The public dimension of moral actions is, in the view of the Catechism, fulfilled by the sacramental and judicial aspects of the church.

This view on the church in its function of public dimension of moral actions is candidly discussed in a text that is taken directly from the ecclesiastical codex: "To the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles, including those pertaining to the social order, and to make judgments on any human affairs to the extent that they are required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls" (2032). But the view on the Church as a public dimension of moral actions also appears, albeit indirectly, in the texts on the doctrine of the 'merit' and that of 'sanctification'. The first category as the Catechism gives it is a category that has reference to the public character of moral actions. "Merit," says the text, "refers in general to the *recompense owed* by a community or a society for the action of one of its members" (2006). This recompense rests on the principles of justification and equality. After this definition the text of the Catechism applies this fact to the relationship between God and human being, again in the light of that which is said on *gratia preveniens*. "God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace." God initiates, and human deeds are secondary (2008). The Catechism classifies the 'goods' (*bona*) that arise from these actions as aspects of the "spiritual progress [that] tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called 'mystical' because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments" (2014). In this one can see the crowning of a position that can be described as 'Catholic pietism'. In it is placed the core of the alternative that the Catechism formulates for the moral subject of the Enlightenment.

In order to define clearly the import of this Catholic pietism, I will compare this position with a 'theology of the signs of the times'. This position refers to salvation history when one interprets one's own history from within and bases it in the framework of the promises and fulfilments of divine providence. Such an interpretation of one's own history implies a historical analysis of the developments of the history that we are both witnessing and experi-

encing now. In *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) this is expressed as follows. It is said of the church that its goal is "to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served" (no. 3). This text concludes the foreword of *Gaudium et Spes*. Following immediately is the statement, "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of *reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel*, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other."¹³

The French theologian and historian M.-D. Chenu has given an interesting interpretation of the passage on the "understanding of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel." A number of aspects of this will be discussed here.¹⁴ In the past acquaintance with the phrase 'the signs of the times' stemmed primarily from exegesis—there was no place for it in contemporary theology. Given its origin (Matthew 16:3), it was linked primarily with the idea of the 'end of time' and not with actual history. The text of *Vatican Council II*, however, links the phrase emphatically with actual and continuing history. With the introduction of the phrase in *Gaudium et Spes* it acquires a new and renewed meaning for theology.¹⁵ There has also been opposition to it. Some have indicated that the phrase has a christological and eschatological meaning in Scripture, while this is not as clearly the case in the conciliar text. Others stress that with the use of this term GS did not give enough attention to the transcendence of the Kingdom of God over against history and not enough attention to the negative aspects of history, evil, and sin. Chenu acknowledges these objections. But more important in his eyes is the fact that the phrase formulates an epistemological principle of a "concrete, historical theology." The phrase 'signs of the times' is therefore the same as understanding which paradigmatic change or renaissance appears in our time. Observation of the signs of the times is therefore also a 'practical' opportunity. It is linked intrinsically to actions that are directed toward the realization

¹³ Cf. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes* (Dublin, 1975).

¹⁴ Cf. T. Van den Hoogen, *Pastorale Theologie: Ontwikkeling en structuur in de theologie van M.-D. Chenu* (Alblasserdam, 1982), pp. 218-23.

¹⁵ The primarily sources in which the phrase has this new meaning are: the summons to the Council by John XXIII, dated 25 December 1961; *Pacem in Terris* (encyclical by John XXIII, dated 11 April 1963); *Ecclesium suam* (encyclical by Paul VI, dated 6 August 1964); *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4 (7 December 1965).

of the destiny that a people describes in its history and with being and becoming aware of the roots of that history.

This concrete historical theology also has a moral dimension, as Jon Sobrino, a theologian working in El Salvador, stresses. From the perspective of such a theology the moral issue is characterized not by the question "What should I do?" but by the question "What needs to be done urgently here and now for the sake of justice?" In this framework the words of Jesus—"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24)—do not constitute the final piece of a Catholic pietism with an anti-Enlightenment sentiment (2029) but the starting point of the fundamentally moral dimension that is present in the choice for a faith described as following Jesus. The goal of this moral attitude is universal reconciliation, and this reconciliation is viewed as the fruit of justice.